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CASTORF STAGING LIMONOV: TRANSGRESSION AND NEO-TOTALITARIANISM AT THE BERLINER VOLKSBÜHNE

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Abstract || In 2008, German director, Frank Castorf, staged an adaptation of Eduard Limonov's 1979 novel *Fuck Off, Amerika*. Limonov's novel scandalized audiences with its description of capitalist excess and nihilism by detailing the exploits of a Soviet dissident in New York City. Castorf's adaptation aligns itself with Limonov's critique of both the socialist and capitalist projects, and reinforces the political line of his own theatre, the Berliner Volksbühne. The production centralizes around the novel's protagonist Eddie (Eduard Limonov's alter-ego), maximizing on Limonov's real-life biography as leader of the extremist National Bolshevik Party in Russia. Both Castorf and Limonov delineate the ideological fantasies of former socialist regimes as a postsocialist performance of politics. As this depiction is reliant on Limonov's political involvement in real zones of war and conflict, both artists use questionable means to mark geo-political terrains where 'Americanization' and neo-liberalism have not firmly taken root. As such, the production represents the attempt to perpetuate a struggle against the Western 'colonization' of the former East, which was most vibrant in the immediate years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Keywords || Postsocialism | Crisis | Totalitarianism | Postdramatic Theatre.

0. Introduction

In 2008, German director Frank Castorf staged an adaptation of *Fuck Off, Amerika*¹ at the legendary Volksbühne theatre in Berlin. The production was based on a fictional memoir written in 1979 by the Soviet dissident poet Eduard Limonov. Limonov's novel scandalized audiences with its description of capitalist excess and nihilism by detailing the sexual exploits of a Soviet émigré in 1970s New York City. It also seemed to demonstrate that the Soviet Union and America were interchangeable regimes in both their rhetorical claims of achieved utopia, as well as in their repressive features. Although Castorf's adaption was staged nearly thirty years after the novel's publication, it aligns itself with Limonov's critique of both the socialist and capitalist projects. As such, it is reflective of the political ethos of the Volksbühne theatre in both its disdain for the American way of life, as well as its attempt to endorse alternatives to two hitherto unsatisfactory political systems—communism and capitalism. Once a workers' or socialist theatre, the Volksbühne is today considered a last bastion of aggressive anti-capitalist sensibilities, as well as an incubator for politicized and aesthetically radical productions. Its mandate under Castorf from 1992 onwards has been to provide a politicized space and alternative community to Berliners—one that espouses resistance to the rapid gentrification of the city's core. To be clear, Castorf's desire was never to resurrect the fallen socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR) regime, but rather the hope that something new might spring forth from its vestiges—a possibility all but erased by the late 2000s.

Castorf's adaptation of *Fuck Off, Amerika* is centered on the exploits of the Soviet dissident Eddie, Limonov's alter-ego, maximizing Limonov's real-life, present-tense biography as the founder and leader of the extremist National Bolshevik Party² in Russia. Both Castorf with this staging and Limonov with his real-life political interventions are invested in locating spaces wherein the possibilities for an alternative to capitalism seems to be alive. Where Berlin in the immediate post-Wall years evoked the wild unpredictability and social pluralism of the Weimar-era, it was, by the mid- to late 2000s, relatively staid and gentrified. Castorf, as artistic director of a theatre with a unique history and mandate, was therefore forced to look beyond Berlin to locate vibrant and authentic contestations of Westernization and neo-liberalism. Castorf imports Limonov's postsocialist³ performance of politics to keep resistance alive within the theatre space. In his adaptation, 'Amerika' becomes a synecdoche for those forces that have eliminated the possibility for any political alternative to emerge after the collapse of the GDR. Simply by virtue of staging Limonov's artistic-political oeuvre, Castorf indicates that reunification and gentrification are not uncontested,

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1 | *Fuck Off, Amerika* is the German title of the memoir published in 1984. For this paper, I have used the English translation, *It's Me, Eddie* (1983). The original *БаужцаМейзкэд* was published in Russian in 1979.

2 | The National Bolshevik Party is a direct-action movement that was founded in order to fuse the ultra-left and the ultra-right in opposition to the disastrous tenure of President Boris Yeltsin.

3 | Post-socialism, according to Aleš Erjavec (2003), represents a broad range of social-political phenomena that took place during and immediately after the collapse of the Socialist bloc. This period and its correlating aesthetic logic can be characterized by both crisis and optimism – the latter based on the hope that an improved socialism, or another political alternative might surface before liberalism and capitalism firmly take root. I argue that postsocialist struggle is ongoing in many non-EU, former Soviet bloc nations where the socialist and totalitarian pasts remain unresolved.

particularly by those who have been disinherited or disenfranchised in these processes.

Castorf's production gives expression to these contestations and to the dangerous, titillating, yet resistant fantasies of the disinherited. The artist Limonov has himself had to migrate from one counter-hegemonic terrain to another in his quest to locate authentic political dynamism and resistance. This quest drives him from the Soviet Union to the New York underground scene in the late 1970s, and then back again to the more dramatic zones of real war and conflict within former Socialist Bloc nations in the 1990s and 2000s. Both the murky political contours of Castorf's Volksbühne—which oscillates from extreme Right to extreme Left-wing sensibilities—and the totalitarian contours of Limonov's political interventions could be interpreted as a provocative play with explosive signifiers. But these artists' oeuvres are simultaneously disorientating and disconcerting even as they create important openings or refuse closure.

The phenomena of the Volksbühne also demonstrates how a state of social and political crisis is hailed by the artist (Castorf) within a historical context (Berlin in the early 1990s) and how, once this moment dissipates (by the late 2000s) it necessitates the active searching-out of new terrains of contestation or dissent. This explains why, on the one hand, Castorf stages the political/artistic oeuvre of a Russian dissident in Berlin in 2008, once the gentrification of Berlin has quelled the last vestiges of postsocialist tumult. The question that necessarily surfaces is whether Castorf's staging indicates an ongoing political vitality still brewing at the Volksbühne, or whether the production is merely indulging in regressive fantasies of dictatorial power as Limonov plays these out. In other words, are the transgressive or taboo-breaking features of Limonov's oeuvre, as Castorf stages them, merely titillating tropes now easily absorbed into capitalist spectacle? Or, by zeroing in on Limonov's oeuvre, do the postsocialist and post avant-garde categories of performance indicate an important trend within zones where neo-liberalism has not yet taken firmly root?

1. The Political Ethos of Castorf's Volksbühne

In 1992, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the *enfant terrible* from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), Frank Castorf, was appointed artistic director of the storied Volksbühne theatre (*People's Theatre*) in Berlin⁴. Located in the middle of the former capital, the theatre's location demanded engagement with the disorienting conditions of German reunification. With Castorf's penchant for staging politicized deconstructions of classical German dramas,

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4 | The theatre was built in 1913 on the eve of WWI, and represented the first theatre built by and for the working classes of Berlin. It emerged out of a Germany-wide "people's theatre" movement in the late 19th century which sought to provide workers with access to German "culture".

together with a programming line-up of rock concerts and lectures, and by accommodating political demonstrations inside the theatre space, the Volksbühne in the 1990s managed to create a unique social hub that brought together all types of Berliners from workers and students, to intellectuals and bohemians.

Under Castorf, however, the Volksbühne also posited itself as a site that aggressively marked the crisis of post 1989, reunification-era Germany⁵. Unlike the bourgeois theatres located in former West Berlin, the Volksbühne absorbed and reflected Germany's most intense and concentrated site of ideological collision: Berlin itself. Here, the failed promise of socialism and the disappointing realities of late capitalism came starkly to the fore. There was palpable civic discontent: a feeling of nationless-ness, the possibility for political alternatives being quickly eradicated by Westernization under the conservative Helmut Kohl government, and the rising specter of fascism in the neo-Nazi movement, especially in the former East. According to Castorf's diagnosis, former GDR citizens, jobless youths, the disenfranchised, all longed for a sense of community now rapidly disappearing. Castorf's response to this situation was to declare the years following reunification in Germany 'a state of crisis'—one that was releasing social energies that had previously been channeled through the socialist project or community structures. These energies had revolutionary potential, Castorf claimed, but they also contained extremist and violent latencies⁶.

Castorf used the writings of political philosophers of the late 19th and early 20th century to inform his productions, particularly those that responded to liberalism and capitalism with a call to violence, sacrifice, and revolutionary zeal. Castorf's recitations of Nietzsche, Ernst Jünger, and Martin Heidegger, for example, were interpreted as the director's personal investment in a genealogy of fascist ideology, but were in fact designed, at least in part, to scandalize the German press. Castorf, a notorious provocateur, created a deliberately contradictory political persona. Clues to his radical politics spanned the gambit from the Stalin portrait that dominates his office, to the extreme right-wing ideologues that he quoted in interviews and in his productions' programs. The Volksbühne, after all, was traditionally a left-wing workers theatre and nothing is more taboo in Germany than flirtation with fascist ideology. But for Castorf it was important to explore the seductive pull of these authoritarian projects in order to understand what makes some disenfranchised citizens return to them in times of social tumult. Socialist dictatorships or, more specifically, totalitarianism—replete with its powerful symbolism, rhetoric of sacrifice, and will to domination—is, according to him, diametrically opposed to the ennui or postmodern stagnation he linked to the American way of life, as well as to life under most instances of real existing socialism. More importantly, the revitalization of extremist

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5 | Also known as the *Wendezeit* – the period of change or transition in the immediate years following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

6 | For further discussion of Castorf's take on the social and political crisis of Germany in the 1990s, see Hans-Dieter Schütt's (1996) interviews with Castorf in *Die Erotik des Verrats: Gespräche mit Frank Castorf*.

political projects is an important indication that German reunification, as an operation of Westernization and neo-liberalization, was being contested.

Castorf attempted to directly absorb the politics and atmosphere of the Berlin streets by, for example, granting the homeless their own theatre ensemble within the Volksbühne⁷. He also allowed neo-Nazi youths, another demographic group he identified as marginalized, to attend his production of *A Clockwork Orange* (1993), which resulted in brawls and vandalism during performances. In his production of *A Clockwork Orange*, Castorf rendered the situation of the alienated youths of Burgess' novel analogous to that of neo-Nazis in Berlin. He went so far as to juxtapose the action on the stage with documentary footage of concentration camps, thereby taking the 'dark energies' of local right-wing radicalism to its most sinister conclusion. Through his attempt at direct engagement with these disenfranchised neo-Nazis, as well as by staging such graphic documentary footage, Castorf sought to make dangerous social energies and potentialities visible within the theatre space. This dramaturgical approach was also meant to be a flagrant gesture to the hermetically-sealed West Berlin theatres, which Castorf thought were bourgeois and hence immune to the plight of real Berliners, especially youths and those from the former GDR. Castorf, instead, attempted to convey a radical degree of authenticity in his productions and proposed a confrontational conjuring of socially fringe elements within his productions⁸. These actions were more for the sake of providing a tangible expression of postsocialist crisis, as well as the ongoing crisis of capitalism, rather than to facilitate a working through of the fascist past. Fascism's unsettling recurrence was, for Castorf, a corollary of the rapid shift into a neoliberal economy in the former East, leading to the breakdown of not only social infrastructure, but of social bonds.

However, it is precisely under the condition of crisis and the social-political amorphousness of those years immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall wherein Castorf saw the potential for something altogether new to emerge. This new political system would be an alternative to real existing socialism: perhaps a yet-to-defined leftist anarchism, or something else that would evolve organically out of the vestiges of the former GDR.

2. Castorf and Limonov: Postsocialist Provocateurs

Castorf has managed to keep the combative spirit of postsocialist crisis alive at the Volksbühne, in spite of the almost complete gentrification of Berlin by the late-2000s. In his choice of dramatic material and

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7 | This ensemble comprising of homeless performers was called "Ratten" or "Rats".

8 | See also productions such as Castorf's *König Lear* (1992) or Johann Kresnik's ballet about *Ernst Junger* (1995).

programming, he has managed to keep a social and political wound splayed open: a reminder of the failed promises of socialism and capitalism, as well as the colonizing thrust of neo-liberalism. However, it has become increasingly difficult for Castorf to sustain the Volksbühne's vitality amidst both the changing demographics of the theatre's audience, as well as accusations of his directorial style becoming repetitive and exhausted (and, arguably, a kind of brand or trademark itself). Castorf's 2008 stage adaptation of Limonov's *Fuck Off, Amerika* exemplifies the manner through which Castorf attempts to perpetuate the notion of social-political crisis, and thus to keep the stakes of a performance heightened to the extreme. Castorf's production is centered on excerpts from the fictional memoir of the real-life poet Eduard 'Eddie' Limonov, a Soviet writer-in-exile in New York City in the late 1970s. The adaptation, however, is crucially reliant upon the sensational elements of Limonov's real-life biography beginning in the early 1990s, at which point Limonov transformed himself from underground poet into founder and 'great leader' of the extremist National Bolshevik Party (NBP) in Russia. It is Limonov's trajectory from dissident artist/outsider to leader of the NBP that lends credence to Castorf's claims about the desires and fantasies of the disenfranchised.

Limonov's migration from anarchist poetry to a more high-stakes intervention within the political arena follows a trajectory emblematic of the transition from late socialist to postsocialist art. This trajectory, however, is contingent on perceiving Limonov's political interventions as, in part at least, an extension of his artistic practice. According to art historian Michael Epstein, art in the late socialist and postsocialist periods manifested common traits across Socialist Bloc countries. In the case of late socialism, the political thawing that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1960s enabled some forms of unofficial art to be tolerated. Prior to emigrating, the poet Limonov was part of such a scene in the Soviet Union – one that allowed him to work in a liminal space between official power and underground subversive practices. Limonov, however, chooses to leave the Soviet Union after refusing to work for the KGB, seeking the opportunity to write more freely in America. His fictional memoir, which forms the basis for Castorf's stage adaptation, documents his period of exile in the Russian émigré community in New York City. There, the class system, racial tensions, and political censorship render him disillusioned by the discovery that the United States are, ultimately, just as repressive as the Soviet Union. His wife Elena leaves him, work is poorly paid, and critical voices are censored or silenced. Sordid sexual encounters and the thrill of potential revolutionary violence, which he encounters through his casual involvement with the Trotskyite underground, are juxtaposed with the routine of menial tasks required to survive under late capitalist conditions.

Like Castorf, Limonov and his alter-ego Eddie seek collective invigoration through crisis, chaos, and potential violence. In the novel, Eddie finds refuge in the New York underground scene—in the subculture of self-professed outsiders, punks, and revolutionaries, as well as within gritty physical spaces that still existed within the Manhattan of the late 1970s. Through his flagrant disregard of the status quo, Eddie attempts to off-set his nihilism by living out the avant-garde's messianic, sacrificial real life stakes. This unrelenting desire for authenticity—expressed through subversive sexual escapades and revolutionary political activity—is juxtaposed with the memoir's broader depiction of postmodern America.

Limonov's portrayal of America bears striking resemblance to that of Jean Baudrillard—another philosopher Frank Castorf frequently invoked at the Volksbühne to convey his sense of foreboding at the Americanization of the former East. For Baudrillard, America is the epitome of, not so much late capitalism run amok, but rather its morphing into pure image or *simulacra*. In his philosophical travel log *America* (1988), Baudrillard renders a postmodern America analogous to Alfred Jarry's novel *The Supermale* (1902). Here, a cyclist crossing the Siberian steppes on an "incredible journey" dies of exhaustion along the way. Unaware that he is dead, the rider pedals on, propelling a "Great Machine". His rigor mortis is converted into motive power and the rider actually accelerates as a function of his inertia. In other words, the dead are "capable of going quicker, of keeping the machine going better than the living since they no longer have any problems" (Baudrillard, 1988: 115). For Baudrillard, the "Great Machine" is analogous to American superpower-dom—propelled by the delusional myth of its own progress.

In this way, America becomes interchangeable with the Soviet Union since these two superpowers both run on fictionalized, mediatized images of achieved utopia. In Limonov's *Fuck Off, Amerika* it is the fiction of these superpowers' projections, as well as the banality of life under them, that compels the poet Eddie to actively search out vestiges of creative or political vitality. In America, Eddie locates these within the fissures of the system—amongst Black, Queer, marginalized subjects who represent the only *real* potential for revolutionary struggle. But as Manhattan's grittier spaces fail to turn into zones of combat, the real-life Eduard Limonov is compelled to migrate from sub-cultural art-world practices into the political arena within the former Soviet Union. With the founding of his National Bolshevik Party in 1992, Limonov comes to embody the features of socialist dictatorial power. As such, he has migrated from anarchist bohemianism into a representation of precisely the authoritarianism that he, ostensibly, deplored. However, for Limonov, the trope or idea of the socialist Great Leader still bears a seductive association with collective power, domination and utopia which real-existing

socialism itself stripped it of.

Such an ambiguous deployment of totalitarian symbolism is a feature that surfaced within the context of postsocialist art practices both prior to and after the demise of the Socialist bloc. It is a practice inspired by both Western pop art and postmodernism. Like the Slovenian band *Laibach*⁹, for example, Limonov's real-life political campaign provocatively utilizes Socialist Realist and fascist symbolism in a disorienting way to mark an unresolved relationship with the totalitarian past. These kinds of practices resist easy dismissal as kitsch, or the irony associated with Western postmodern art practices. They shock and alarm, and intend to intervene within contested geo-political terrain where the mythology of erstwhile dictatorships is being reanimated as an option for the future. These practices also draw an analogy between the totalitarian past and the present, marking the latent fascist contours of late capitalism as a totalizing disciplinary regime. As such, Limonov's oeuvre manifests a provocative ambiguity of precisely the kind that Castorf wishes to import to the Volksbühne stage.

3. Castorf's Staging of *Fuck Off, Amerika* at the Volksbühne (2008)

Castorf's theatrical adaptation of *Fuck Off, Amerika*, which consists of fragmented vignettes drawn from Limonov's fictional memoir, is emblematic of the postdramatic form of theatre defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999). To be clear: the postdramatic genre is not an epochal categorization, but rather an aesthetic one that marks a break from the dominance of the dramatic text and its sealed and mimetic universe. As per Lehmann, the shift in emphasis from *text* to *performance* took place in European and North American theatre from the 1970s onwards. While the text retreats, it is often replaced by non-linear associative scenes, tableaux or vignettes. Significant qualities marking the postdramatic genre include foregrounding the *materiality* of performance, the contingencies of the performance event (i.e. space, time, the co-presence of the audience), as well as intertextuality, intermediality and open-endedness. In Lehmann's seminal work *Postdramatic Theatre*, Castorf's theatre is listed as exemplary of the postdramatic form.

Castorf's staging juxtaposes loosely connected excerpts from Limonov's novel with documentary citations and facts drawn from Limonov's real-life political project. The émigré milieu depicted on stage is one decorated with a seedy, 1970s disco vibe. In trademark Castorf style, the performers' frenetic, hysterical energy and high-pitched voices, as well as the women's teetering about on exaggerated

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9 | *Laibach* is a former-Yugoslavian and Slovenian avant-garde music group. The band is the musical wing of the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* movement—a politicized art collective founded in 1984.

stiletto heels, are used to create a sense of precariousness and urgency within the performance. The production relies heavily on Limonov's notoriety due to scandals associated with his National Bolshevik Party. In fact, with the party having been banned in 2007 after a series of sensational political stunts, including the seizure of the Kremlin's reception office, one might conclude that Castorf's staging was a timely intervention on the party's behalf¹⁰.

The National Bolshevik Party is precisely the sort of political party that the anarcho-leftist, anti-capitalists at the Volksbühne would be paying attention to. The party's instantly recognisable flag—red, with a white circle and a black hammer and sickle in the centre—is a provocative mix of Communist and Nazi imagery. Limonov's followers even refer to him as “vozhd” or leader, the way Stalinists addressed Joseph Stalin. Under the auspices of his ‘leadership’ Limonov has penned books that delineate his vision for the new Russia. For example, all women between the ages of 25 to 35 would be forced to give birth to four children, who would then be handed over to the state for training in the military arts and poetry¹¹. To what extent Limonov intends such a shocking assertion seriously remains deliberately ambiguous. As such, it recalls Castorf's line of right-wing political philosophy, which the latter uses to disorient what he perceives to be a politically-correct and hence repressive state media.

In Castorf's theatrical adaption, Eddie's lines from the memoir are distributed amongst the different characters he portrays from the Russian émigré community in America. This deconstruction of the central character is a typical feature of the postdramatic genre, and postmodern performance more broadly wherein one overarching perspective, or the hierarchy of author, character or plot, is destabilized. Castorf focuses on the characters' disillusionment with life in America, which is juxtaposed with outrageous and humorous scenes of capitalist excess. In one vignette, for example, an actor makes a revoltingly over-the-top fruit smoothie in a blender (with all possible fruits considered rare and exotic in the Soviet Union and forces his compatriots to drink it). There are also two, shockingly long, hyper-stylized, slapstick sex orgies between Eddie, his wife Elena, and another woman that are meant to demonstrate titillating forms of taboo transgression through typical Castorf-style slapstick tropes. A piano rendition of the cynical Pet Shop Boy's song “I Love You, You're Paying my Rent” serves as a leitmotif. Castorf focuses, in part, on the theme of Eddie's wife, Elena's, betrayal – a woman corrupted by American capitalism's pandering of glamour, sex, and drugs. One failed attempt at a sexual encounter between her and Eddie takes place while she, Elena, is provocatively posed in a shopping cart. Castorf's polemic is clear: the émigré community has made a Faustian deal with America. Their betrayal becomes

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10 | The NBP resurfaced in 2010 as part of the “The Other Russia” movement. The movement generated a coalition party that united disparate factions against Putin.

11 | See Limonov's interview with the *Guardian* from December 12, 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/12/eduard-limonov-interview-putin-nightmare>

analogous to the betrayal that was made by the majority of the Socialist bloc in the 1990s as they unflinchingly embraced Western consumerism and the American way of life.

Depictions of the émigré community are juxtaposed with scenes that animate Limonov's real-life political project. The set, designed by Jonathan Meese, is a minimalist take on the NBP's totalitarian aesthetic with an all-white backdrop dominated by a massive bunker shaped like an iron cross. It is sparsely decorated with props consisting of blood-stained banners and fans that invoke the NBP's political regalia. This totalitarian imagery dominates the set as an ego-maniacal extension of Limonov's fantasy of propelling political *vanguardism*, expressed through the retro-guard iconography of Stalinism and fascism. As Castorf seems to imply, this fantasy might well have sprung forth from the peripheries of American society which Eddie inhabits, but applies equally to his own ideological stance¹².

Under Castorf, the Volksbühne in the 1990s sought to intervene in a context wherein many citizens of the former GDR felt resentment and derision from members of the more materially privileged West. This feeling of resentment and inferiority was, for youths in particular during those immediate post-reunification years, compounded by the lack of community available to them after the collapse of socialist infrastructure. For Castorf, this phenomenon explained the fantasy of domination, and hence the resort to neo-Nazism, of marginalized youths in those immediate post-Wall years. Castorf's staging of Limonov's disillusionment with America, and subsequent migration into an extremist political agenda, gives this transformation direct expression.

At various intervals throughout Castorf's two and a half hours production, the different émigré figures rhapsodize about weaponry and lust for war and battle. At one point, two characters upload a machine gun, place it on a podium, and begin firing shots directly out into the audience. This scene is a citation from the documentary *Serbian Epics* (1992) by Pawel Pawlekowski, which is set in Bosnia during the Balkan war. Standing on a hilltop, alongside the accused Serbian war criminal Radovan Karadžićs (known as the "butcher of Bosnia"), Limonov is shown shooting a machine gun down at the city of Sarajevo. Limonov later claimed that the footage was tampered with and that he was, in fact, at a shooting range. However, this quotation and the ambiguity of the footage itself, is emblematic of Limonov's use of postmodern citation practices.

As is emblematic of the postdramatic genre of performance, Castorf's production does not definitively end as much as unravel. It becomes clear that the all-white backdrop represents a kind of haunting of the present by the totalitarian past. This past becomes the projection

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12 | It is important to add that one objective of the Volksbühne under Castorf was to confront the desire of the marginalized to turn the "hatred" and rejection they felt coming towards them back out into the world (Schutt, 1996: 71-72).

screen for a yet-to-be determined future or, alternately, 'no future', the end of history, and the victory of a void or vapid image world that is neoliberalism that would replace the grand narrative and utopia.

4. A Postsocialist Performance of Politics

The contours of Limonov's political campaign bleed messily from the political into performance and conceptual practices. We cannot be certain about the legitimacy with which Limonov lives out his commitment to his 'National Bolshevism' project – a party which is already a postmodern play on seemingly irreconcilable Right and Left-wing signifiers. Limonov, from the 1990s onwards, traverses geo-political terrains where postsocialist chaos is ongoing, and wherein the Western liberal consensus has not managed to firmly take root—in Kazakhstan, Georgia, or Chechnya, for example. Here, autonomy-seeking nations or ethnic minorities struggle to unshackle the vision of one great leader who imbued the Master Signifier of Communism with a smiling future-forward face—for example, Stalin, or in a very different way, Tito—only to produce similar iterations of great leaders with ethno-nationalist contours. By melding Socialist Realist and fascist tropes in his political campaign, Limonov marks the impulses of these factions as interchangeable. Neither the former cultural dominant (i.e. Russia or Serbia), nor the autonomy seeking ethnic minorities are free from the ongoing, residual fantasy of a utopian imagined community, replete with a benevolent leader, a mythological past, and a harmonious, contented populace.

In this way, Limonov's intervention reflects Boris Groys' (1992) analysis of post Stalinist art in Russia wherein the aesthetic repetition is necessary. New Russian art—Sots Art, a movement that started in the 1970s which combined Socialist Realism and Pop Art—reiterates Stalinist iconography as a social and aesthetic phenomenon up to the point at which Stalin becomes a signifier devoid of his original political meaning. This art plays with text and context. It constructs and then deconstructs, it designs utopia and morphs into anti-utopia because it wants to situate itself in a mythology that allows it to free Stalin from the Russian people's resentment, but still confront their "feeling of superiority" that paradoxically existed as a product of the Soviet Union's self-mythologizing (Groys, 1992: 115). In Groys' *The Total Art of Stalinism*, this "feeling of superiority" reinforced within Socialist Realist imagery can be traced back to the historical avant-garde. The Russian avant-garde's attempt to holistically integrate art and life was, as Groys claims, their own narcissistic fantasy to be the generators of a new world order. Hence, Limonov represents both the avant-garde's self-sacrificing commitment to revolutionary violence, as well as its historical culmination in a new world order

as a totalizing aesthetic project¹³. It is precisely this trajectory from avant-gardism into totalitarianism that Limonov embodies as he embeds himself in zones of ongoing postsocialist struggle.

At the same time, one must take seriously Limonov's commitment to supporting an anti-Atlanticist, anti-American political agenda¹⁴. Limonov endorses the demarcation of an anti-Western 'Eurasian' zone—one that would be dominated by ethnic Russians and which is supported by the likes of the ultra-nationalist geopolitical theorist Alexander Dugin. Proponents of this ethno-centric model tend to see a Russian-Eurasian territory as a potential new superpower to contend with the European Union. In Limonov's vision, however, this territory would resist the regulating force of neoliberalism by retaining a chaotic and liminal expanse between the West and the 'Orient'.

Limonov was ultimately unable to fully live out his artistic-political practice in America due to the forces of censorship and the increased conservatism of the Reagan-era. However he has found, within former Soviet Bloc nations, a terrain wherein ongoing crisis and conflict offers him the vitality he seeks out. His politics are a flagrant gesture toward the hegemony of liberalism—an intervention that he also achieves through provocative statements against Western Europe, in the press. For example, he juxtaposes Europe's 'repressive' political correctness with Russia's 'barbarian' vitality. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2010, for example, Limonov stated that, «Europeans are so timid they remind me of sick and elderly people. There is so much political correctness and conformity [in Europe] that you can't open your mouth. It's worse than prison. In Russia, fortunately, the people still have some barbarian spirit» (Bennet, 2010).

This 'barbarian' imaginary—this Romantic fantasy of the wild and unfettered East—is, on the one hand, alarmingly neo-imperialist, but also sounds like the 19th century anti-Western voice of a Dostoevsky or Slavophile type. It also conveys a kind of 'open', yet-to-be determined conceptual expanse. As such, it evokes the post 1989 political vacuum wherein the sudden absence of the overarching political framework invited all manner of political alternatives to come to the fore. This situation is reflected by Slavoj Žižek with regard to what happened in Romania right after the fall of Communism:

It is difficult to imagine a more salient index of the "open" character of a historical situation in its becoming (...) of that intermediate phase when the former Master-Signifier, although it has already lost its hegemonical power, has not yet been replaced by a new one... The masses who poured into the streets of Bucharest "experienced" the situation as "open"... they participated in the unique intermediate state of passage from one discourse (social link) to another, when, for a brief, passing moment, the hole in the big Other, the symbolic order, became visible.

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13 | As per Groys, the revolutionaries of October 1917 wanted to establish a society that was not just more egalitarian and economically stable, but also more aesthetically beautiful. Their intention was that the "entire economic, social, and everyday life of the nation was totally subordinated to a single planning authority commissioned to regulate, harmonize and create a single whole out of even the most minute details, this authority—the Communist party leadership—was transformed into a kind of artist whose material was the entire world and whose goal was to 'overcome resistance' of this material and make it pliant, malleable, capable of assuming any desired form" (Groys 1992: 3).

14 | Anti-Atlanticism is a political position delineated by Alexander Dugin in 1997 in *The Foundations of Geopolitics: the Geopolitical Future of Russia*. His book declares that «the battle for the world rule of [ethnic] Russians» (213) has not ended and Russia remains the staging area of a new anti-American revolution.

The enthusiasm which carried them was literally the enthusiasm over this hole, not yet hegemonized by any positive ideological project. (Žižek, 1993: 1-2)

NOTES

15 | See Peter Gay's 1968 seminal *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, New York City: W. W. Norton, 2001.

What existed in the early 1990s across the former Socialist bloc was a sense of openness and enthusiasm—a sense that the future could breed something entirely different, politically, from what had hitherto been experienced. It is precisely this moment that is continually sought out in both Castorf's and Limonov's oeuvres.

Limonov migrates further and further 'East' to locate conditions for his interventions, retreating from the notion of 'history as progress' denoted by late capitalism's liberating thrust. Limonov's project, therefore, can also be understood as what Charles Jencks calls "post avant-garde". As per Jencks, "[a]ll the avant-gardes of the past believed that humanity was going somewhere, and it was their joy and duty to discover this new land and see that people arrived there on time" (Jencks, 1987: 20). In contrast to the progressive orientation of the avant-garde towards a utopian future, "the Post-Avant-Garde (a strand of postmodernism) believes that humanity is going in several directions at once, some of them more valid than others, and it is their duty to be guides and critics" (Jencks, 1987: 20).

So are Castorf and Limonov being guides and critics? Or is Castorf's production, and Limonov's oeuvre within it, the mere staging of titillating forms of taboo transgression vis-à-vis a totalitarian imagery? What was at stake for Castorf and the Volksbühne in the 1990s was the actual transformation of society. Castorf wanted to seize the moment of crisis and use the Volksbühne to mobilize all manner of political alternatives in hopes that something new would emerge. Although this possibility has now largely been eradicated, the invoking of crisis and alarm must be sustained at all costs. It is locked into the operating logic of the Volksbühne theatre and marks it as a site that presents not only outrageous, scandal-inciting productions, but that sustains anti-capitalist resistance in the city's core.

As Hans-Thies Lehmann reminds us, theatre, as aesthetic behavior, is unthinkable without *transgression*. But transgression, as we know, has long been commodified and the outsider (i.e. punk, revolutionary, *enfant terrible*) has become the insider, particularly in Berlin and dating back to the Weimar republic.¹⁵ The obvious conclusion to draw would be that no avant-garde or post avant-garde implying a politics of transgression is possible in Berlin anymore. As Lehmann puts it, "the transgressive politics of avant-gardism presupposes cultural limits which are no longer relevant to the seemingly limitless horizon of multinational capitalism" (2007: 178). But Lehmann himself resists

such a cynical conclusion. For him, art privileges *the individual*, the singular, and the exception, “that which remains unquantifiable in relation to even the best of laws” (2007: 178). What theatre can do is posit the exception to the law vis-à-vis the *individual*, as well as introduce “chaos and novelty into the ordered, ordering perception” (2007: 179).

Limonov represents such an anomalous, chaotic force. He continually highlights and subverts the encroaching ideology of the Western liberal order. He also offers himself, in a kind of messianic act of self-sacrifice, as a human barrier to neoliberalism’s global agenda. But his narcissistic persona—meant as a commentary on the realities of a particular geo-political context, as well as the historic role of the artist therein—could also be seen as a ruse. His inflated persona results in his easy dismissal as a harmless anarcho-bohemian trickster, who in turn resists being taken to task for the troubling patriarchal and fascist dimensions of his work. Castorf imported Limonov’s oeuvre onto the Berlin stage to prop up an image of radical transgression—one that breaks the taboos of German liberalism, particularly around fascist iconography. While Limonov’s work does indeed signal something important to Berlin audiences, Castorf fails to question the National Bolshevik Party’s ethics within his adaptation. What is important for Castorf is Limonov’s radical degree of authenticity and his provocative over-identification with totalitarian leadership within his performance oeuvre. Limonov ultimately functions as Castorf’s double in the production—as a comrade-in-arms in a shared revolutionary ethos. Neither offer productive solutions for the various others with whom these artists claim solidarity. Both are slippery tricksters who mark sites of contestation around formerly dominant master signifiers (i.e. communism or fascism) and deconstruct the ongoing seduction of totalitarian projects. Both seek out and locate vestiges of post socialist tumult wherein utopian fantasy and dystopian realities coincide in unresolved ways.

5. Conclusion

Castorf and Limonov rigorously pursue authentic struggles not their own—re-enacting a prospector’s search through ‘wild’ terrain, be that in the margins of society, or in terrains of postsocialist struggle. Where each posits these terrains as open or resisting closure, what they actually seem to advocate is both moral and political anarchy. This would explain the simultaneous unleashing of a Pandora’s Box of fascist, totalitarian, and patriarchal fantasies and, by doing so, the suspension of ethical boundaries that function as a rejection of liberalism’s terms. This is precisely the dialectic that Castorf proposes when he stages Limonov: the uneasy coexistence of

political extremes of both the Right and Left in an attempt to mobilize all available resources against the seemingly unrelenting infiltration of globalization and neo-liberalism.

Interestingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, it would appear that Castorf's vitriolic assault on Western capitalism in this 2008 production indeed indicated a crisis. It coincided with the collapse of the seeming imperviousness of neo-liberalism wrought by the global financial meltdown. Of the many moments that have destabilized the purported final victories of capitalism and liberal democracy since Francis Fukuyama declared the "end of history" in 1992, the 2008 global financial crisis has arguably been the most colossal. Protest-as-performance was the tactic of many activists involved in the global Occupy movement. The interventions they staged in the world's financial districts deployed the trope of the zombie to represent the purveyors of corporate greed. These 'undead' financiers and participants of the global capitalist economy which these activists characterized, recalled Alfred Jarry's dead cyclists as propellers of the Great Machine in *The Supermale*.

However we choose to interpret Castorf's method of signaling crisis at the Volksbühne, it did debunk the myth of reunification and gentrification as smooth and completed processes in Berlin. The production also points to ongoing resistance to globalization and neo-liberalism as the Volksbühne defiantly tells America to 'Fuck Off'.

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